The Lean Zine Years

Stories of Dark Fantasy,
Urban Detectives,
and Gritty Drama.

1987-1990

Stefan Jackson

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Urban Detectives,
and Gritty Drama.**

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Bound for the first time, this collection contains some of my previously published work of flash and short fiction.

Hardboiled detective tossed with twisted psychological and dressed in the unsettling supernatural.

These stories don't go bump in the night, rather they kick down the door and use a bullhorn to announce their presence and intent.

These were fun stories to put on paper, back in a day when the process was pen to paper, edit, type final edit, then send project to publisher via US mail.

These tales were written in the late 1980s, when I lived in Southern California.

Stefan Jackson

Adults only.

Stories contain rude language,
smoking, drug use and graphic
sexual situations.
May be disturbing
for some readers.

Dedication

With much love to Janet Fox –
Scavenger's Newsletter (1984-2003).
Osage City, Kansas.

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Atonement

The bloody stone wall got closer and closer...

WHRACK!

He stumbled back, tried to use his hands to break his fall, but landed like an unconscious boxer. One hand was trapped between his hip and the stone floor. He'd sprained his wrist quite nicely, but his pain network was severely jammed, so his wrist was put on hold.

Blood from the split skin along his skull streamed into his eyes. It didn't sting-more network jamming. He wiped his eyes with his good hand, then began to pick himself up off the floor. That's when his wrist superseded the pain of his ripped lips, his chipped and broken teeth. His nose was a blood river.

He rolled onto his back, raised his head, wiped the blood and matted hair from his face and eyes and stared at his target. A gallon of blood ran down the stone wall. He looked behind him-only four feet from the starting line. He crawled-slithered to the far wall. Placing his back against it, he used the wall to walk himself upright. He shut his eyes in an attempt to block out the thundering voice in his head. His mother's voice:

"You're evil, boy! I'm going to beat the wickedness from your soul. God help me—you will live by the word of the Lord!"

A shadow stabbed him; he winced at nothing, then abruptly opened his eyes.

His mother was dead. He'd killed her before she had a chance to make good her promise. But she was right; he was evil. That was why he was imprisoned in this stone cube with a metal door.

His eyes teared. He was sorry for killing his mother, so he would drive Satan from his soul for her and, God willing, meet her in Heaven.

He wiped his eyes again, straightened, wavered, then took off for his seventh run.

The bloody stone wall got closer and closer...

BU-THWRACK!

He fell back hard and fast. As he lay on the cold stone floor, consciousness ebbing, he knew atonement was a long road.

His crotch was warm and sticky.

He started to get up again.

END

First published 1987.
New Blood premiere issue.
Edited by Chris Lacher. Glendora, CA.
Font: Helvetica Neue.

Sport

The bullet bites deep into the tree behind him, sending large chips of bark in all directions. From the size of the cavity, he guessed the gun to be a .357 Magnum —Stanley's gun. Stanley is an excellent shot, which means the 'miss' was just a tease.

Quinn doesn't like to be teased.

He scrambles, weaving and ducking through the timber. Stanley was close behind, but at this pace he won't be able to get a clear shot. Quinn snuggles tight against a tree three times his size in diameter, pulls a shaft from his quiver and notches up.

Quinn knows if he can make it to the rock at the base of the hill, he'll be in business.

But that will give Stanley about ten yards of clear shooting. Under normal conditions he could be there in a heartbeat. But in soft, calf-deep snow...

It is too quiet. Stanley is about fifteen yards behind him, somewhere off to the right. There is only one option. Go for it. Quinn takes a deep breath, lets it out slow - there is a cry; muffled, strained, heavily laden with pain.

Quinn presses back against the tree, his mind racing. Jim! Jim has gotten to Stanley.

Jim is the only one who could move through snow unimpeded and soundless.

He also has no noise-making high velocity projectile weapon. Stanley was a top gun, but Quinn had heard no struggle. Just a sickening soft thump and the cry. Maybe there is something to martial arts, Quinn thinks grimly. Then, gritting his teeth, he makes his dash for the rock. In the open he is less of an easy target for Jim than he had been for Stanley, and he knows that staying where he had been would have gotten him dead for sure. He is only a few feet short of the rock when something, some instinct inside him, compels him to dive. He plunges forward, tossing the crossbow ahead of him. He feels a tug at his back and then he hears the scrape of steel against granite as something strikes the rock. He stays low coming out of his roll, grabs the still-loaded crossbow, spins and takes aim. He catches a glimpse of red – the bright sash of Jim's outfit — vanishing into the brush. It is senseless for Jim to come after him now. Quinn can tag him anywhere from this position. Quinn knows Jim will work away from him, circling, and try to hit him somewhere up the hill.

The hill. Quinn doesn't want to go up it, but the quickest way between two points is a straight line. They were no more than a thousand yards from the finish, only at this stage the race was hardly just a matter of speed.

Quinn leans heavily against the rock, feels the cold make home of his joints. He pushes through the cotton fog of his memory.

Six weeks. Just six weeks ago they were all best friends. Jim, Stanley, David, Paul, Craig, and himself. Each of them highly respected in his field, whether it be game sportsman, personal bodyguard, or mercenary. Quinn remembers the proposal and winces, as if swallowing something distasteful.

It was Craig Johns' idea. He had been an Airborne Ranger with thirty-two official kills. A veteran — like all of them — of Vietnam and other political melees. He was also a freelance writer whose work was in every merc book on the market. That meant going into the field to get his material. Quinn remembers a campaign he helped Johns with, remembers the orgasmic zest that Johns displayed in combat. The memory of it unnerves him more now than it did then. Quinn recalls that Sunday afternoon in the schoolyard. His team had just won, and the beers were flowing. Soon they started talking the same old shit, and each was tired of hearing it. Bragging about old exploits and bitching that the thrill was gone.

Johns suggested they hunt each other. He got their undivided attention. The man was serious – he had no sense of humor. None of them did. Johns laid out his plan. The event would be held where none of them had ever been — the Appalachians, it was decided, in upstate New York. They could only bring one weapon (although Jim was allowed one set: swords or sais, and he had chosen sais). The object was to get from Point A to Point B alive. If you killed anyone along the way you got his estate. They would each liquidate their assets — personal belongings, savings, stocks, real estate, everything — and open a trust fund. A lawyer was selected, recommended by Quinn based on past satisfactory dealings and given power of attorney.

To keep her faithful, they gave her a million dollars. balance of the unclaimed accounts along with the assurance that at least one of them would return and he would find her if she tried anything funny. Guaranteed. All one had to do was take the driver's license off the corpse of an unlucky participant and present it to Dale. give you the allotted account number receipt, and you would be that much richer. Everyone started from a different Point A — headed toward the same Point B.

Quinn sullenly studies his surroundings. Things are too damn quiet again. He knows at least three of the others are dead. He had taken out Paul, who had gotten David. (Absently his hand drifts to his vest pocket, checking to make sure the two D.L.s are still there. And Jim hit Stanley. That leaves Johns unaccounted for.

Quinn begins to move slowly up the snowy incline. A steady drizzle of ice-rain has started to fall. His jacket is useless. In fact, it has become a water-soaked burden. He is stiff, but ready to strike in a second. A shadow

moves on his left. Before he can re-act, a rumbling crunch of snow locks his attention straight ahead. His eyes flare at the sight of a gigantic snowball rolling directly toward him! It is at least four feet in diameter, seamed in by rows of trees, making it impossible to merely sidestep. The slushy footing makes the prospect of trying to leap over it also seem impossible. The mass of snow isn't likely to kill him, Quinn realizes, but its impact would surely immobilize him long enough for Jim – or Craig Johns – to strike. His instincts cry for him to leap into the timber on his right, away from the snow boulder and away from the flicking shadow he had spotted on the other side, but his mind argues that he would almost certainly be plunging into an awaiting trap. In desperation, at the last possible moment, he opts for his most unexpected move — he dives into the timber on his left, almost precisely where he had seemed the moving shadow. Again, he goes into a roll and again he comes up with his crossbow at the ready.

Nothing happens.

The snow boulder rolls harmlessly by, and, after several beats, he hears it crash against a tree. A brisk wind rubs his exposed face raw, carrying with the stench of a skunk on the defense. Quinn's nerves jump beneath his skin. Once again, slowly, he starts up the hill. The further he walks, the more deliberate, more cautious, his steps become. For one of the few times in his life, he realizes he is scared. A master at the art of fear, now a victim. He swears harshly under his breath that there will be a heavy price to pay for this.

A short spasm of relief washes over Quinn when he notices he in only ten yards from breaking the crest of the hill. It is abruptly replaced by a cold shiver down his spine as he draws even with the large tree on his right.

He raises his bow, finger snaking over the trigger. When he breaks the corner, he spins and releases the shaft. It streaks deep into Jim's back ... Only Jim is already dead.

He is hanging by his ankles from a tree branch; his head severed from his body. It lays in the blood red snow.

Ten inches above it is a thin strand of wire stretched between two trees. Either he blew his own trap or got caught in someone else's. Quinn feels certain that the trap is John's handiwork. But when he checks Jim's pocket licenses, he finds to his surprise and relief — three there: Jim's own, Stanley's, and Craig Johns'. Jim had taken out the combat-skilled writer!

Quinn is now worth close to eight million dollars.

"BABY-BOY-HOWDY!" he shouts out loud.

Slinging the crossbow over his shoulder, he starts rather sprightly up the hill.

After half a dozen steps he freezes, catching himself with the realization that that might not have been the only trap. Slowly and thoroughly, Quinn scans his path. When he proceeds forward again, it is with caution.

As the hill levels off, Quinn sees the yellow flag about five hundred yards ahead.

In another ten minutes, the sun will drop over the west ridge. If there are any more traps, they'll be hell to find in the dark even with his wide-beam flashlight. He quickens his pace, sharply alert, ready for anything, almost hoping for something.

The fear is gone, replaced by the ignorant nerve of greed. Eight million dollars — his!

He thinks of Dale, waiting in Eastport. She doesn't know it yet, but she's one of the richest women in the country – rich beyond the puny million she's already been paid. Hell, he may as well go ahead and marry her. After all, they've been lovers for nearly three years.

Of course, he'd made sure none of the others were aware of that. A warped smile crosses his lips as he thinks about the three days two hellish nights (he'll never again sleep in a tree) of hunting and being hunted by his old crew.

"Thanks guys," he says softly as he walks. "Love ya all—all the way to the bank."

Quinn reaches the flag unscathed. He tells himself the shadows he thought he saw melting into the trees were nothing but tricks of the setting sun.

The brown Jeep Cherokee, fully equipped, stands before him. It looks even better than it did on the showroom floor. He smiles as he recalls the dealer's expression when he was instructed to deliver the vehicle here.

Quinn pulls open the Cherokee's door, throws in his gear, then eagerly throws him-elf in after it. He reaches under the seat, grips the key, plugs it into the ignition and turns it as he pumps the foot feed. the Cherokee disintegrates in a brilliant flash, then explodes outward in a rolling gold-orange-black ball of flame and smoke. Scattered fragments of glass, metal, and flesh fly steaming in all directions.

Just inside the tree line, a safe distance away, Dale smiles as the flames dance shouldn't have left those manuals lying around, she thinks to herself. How-to guides on everything from surveillance to explosives, everything a girl needs succeed. Dale shakes her head somewhat sadly as she realizes that Quinn may have actually loved her. But he wasn't that good in bed really, and he wanted to have kids. God, how she hated kids! But none of that matters now.

Now she has enough clout to make sure the game is played her way or no way. Thanks again, lover, she thinks as she turns her back on the blazing Jeep, you will be remembered fondly. Perhaps I'll even name my first yacht after you.

END

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Edited by Wayne D. Dundee.
Rockford, IL.
Font: American Typewriter Condensed.

My Wife

My wife is here.

I can feel her dark green eyes piercing into me. Her satiny black hair gently mists over my shoulders as she nibbles my ear. Then she drifts away, leaving me with only the cinnamon scent that is hers. She loves to tease and flirt when she is content. But when she is not...

I search the yellow pages for a medium.

When she arrives, I see the seduction in her eyes the moment she enters. I immediately regret having called her here; but it is too late now. Our house is rich with energy.

"How long has your wife been dead?" Her voice is soft and carries the tune of compassion, much as it did over the phone. But now, standing here beside her, I can feel her sincerity. So can my wife. She is no doubt enjoying it. I answer her calmly, looking deeply into her eyes. I see no irises, just distant nebulas.

"Seven years come the end of this month. She would have been forty-nine." She peers through the dirty windows to my soul and thinks the hurt and withdrawal is for my late wife. It is not; it's for her - Madame Denise.

I guide Madame Denise into the study: my wife's domain. I was only allowed in here when she needed and anchor for her astral trips. Often I wanted to kill her body while her soul was roaming free. But I knew better; true evil doesn't die. There was always the possibility of her running me out of my body. Or making me commit suicide. My wife has all my strength. She is my faith.

"How did she die?" asks the Madame as she stares out the opulent east window

"Violently."

The Madame turns to look at me and nods knowingly. All the same, I feel obliged to elaborate.

"She was found in this room - that is to say her remains. My wife exploded. She painted the walls, windows, furniture... All authorities concerned agreed that it was impossible for a man – me - to do such carnage. You see, it was as if something had melted her down, poured her into a bucket and just splashed her around. The people who cleaned up the room treated everything as though it had been simply water damaged. Her case is listed as one of the most extreme incidents of human spontaneous combustion."

Madame Denise looks the room over with awe.

I often entertain myself with the picture of my wife reaching orgasm with one of her Gods, her body too small to contain the fury

of their passion. At least that's how it appeared to me.

"Have you contacted her before?" asks the Madame. It is hard to suppress the smile that wants to leap from my lips.

"Yes. My wife was quite spiritual in life. Sometimes I don't even need assistance to contact her," I lie. I never need assistance.

As she bends over to touch the polished oak floor, I start to ache. The Madame has angelic sensuality. I love the way her light auburn hair drapes over her body, splitting at her supple shoulders, it curtains her small breasts and adds inches to her thin waist. As she walks around the room (soaking in my wife) her hair lovingly caresses... Lord! ... the angel has me... I'm hard! It's been seven years...

"Mr. Winston, are you alright?" The angel speaks in cloud puffs.

"Yes. Would you like a drink?"

"Water would be fine."

I excuse myself and amble out of the room. It is difficult. to break the gravity of her sex. Once outside the door, I touch myself - just to feel the stiff joy again! When my wife died I thought she took it with her.

I peer around the corner; Madame Denise is dancing in the middle of the study, pirouetting, leaping, landing dove-like. My wife was a dancer. She's having fun with Madame Denise. She must like her.

"John."

My wife's frosty voice. I haven't heard it so explicitly since her death.

"Come to me, John."

Jesus! I thought I was used to this! I relax. She's not going to hurt me. She hasn't yet. I walk into the room.

"Does this turn you on?" she smiles, as her nipples swell and peck through the thin white blouse. I nod my appreciation.

She bends over the desk and raises her long black dress, gently shaking her head to let her hair part on either side. As she exposes herself, I feast on the scent of flesh so fresh and unblemished.

"Don't be shy, lover. Come to me. I love you."

Those last words echo through my soul as her magnet pulls me in.

Later...I awake with a corpse.

Madame Denise is lying beside me on the cold oak floor, her body a sledge grey dry husk, ready to crumble for the right wind. Her long red hair is now pale silvery cobwebs; I see small black spiders already nesting.

I look down at my member with disgust. In life, my wife and I had shared a wonderful sex life, but until today she has fever used a medium for sex - only food. Am I to expect this from now on?

Disposing of a corpse is no problem. Just break it up and sweep the ashes.

I always throw them in the fireplace over a roaring flame. My wife enjoys hearing the screams of a newcomer.

END

First published 1988. Noctulpa #2.
Edited by George Hatch.
Long Island City, NY.
Font: Book Antiqua

Mr. Tate

Mr. Tate waits on the subway platform at Union Square.

He is tense, uneasy. Horny. He wants to go to work--he loves his job. But tonight, he is off. He works for the city. The morgue. He can get laid there anytime.

And such a variety (this sixty-year-old man has a spring in his step whenever he's off work). But tonight, he just broods.

His goose-like six-foot frame stands obliquely on the platform.

He doesn't care for the task before him. He broods and stalks, sucking on vinegar gums.

He wants to just walk onto the ward, but he knows Delbrook is on duty, and they don't get along.

Delbrook is quite aware of Mr. Tate but is unsure what to do about him. He's a doper and not too pure him-self. Actually, he's afraid of Mr. Tate more than Mr. Tate is afraid of him. They give each other wide berth but always keep tabs on one another. A supple redheaded boy asks Mr. Tate if he's lonely. Mr. Tate looks him over like cold death and the boy walks on. His over-the-shoulder smirk is white-washed by his air-blown hair, produced by the incoming train.

The thought of warm flesh disgusts Mr. Tate -as it being male, but warm flesh is all he shall have tonight.

He readies himself for the experience. He steps on the train.

Tonight, he will use a knife. World War II, German issue. Deep blood-letting grooves on both sides. He was an Army medic during the war and knows exactly what they can do. He will use it well. He keeps it in a secretly sewn pocket in his overcoat which is wrapped around his arm. It is warm in the city tonight.

The blonde girl at the end of the car is pretty. She reminds him of a girl that was brought in a few nights ago. She had been beaten and raped and thrown into the East River (Mr. Tate is not sure if he did it.) He likes blonde girls with slender figures. The woman at the end of the car is perfect, even though she has small breasts. No matter. She seems to be asleep, but no one really sleeps on the subway. She has very full, suckable lips. They are the only two on the car. Mr. Tate moves closer--one bench away and across the aisle. He wants her now.

He longs to be at work.

Some young toughs enter Mr. Tate's car. Three in all, walking in some ordered fashion, dressed with purpose. The last boy eyes the girl and stops in front of her. He reaches down and squeezes a

handful of her tit, painfully pinching the nipple. The girl slaps at his arm, knocking it away. She straightens up and is slapped hard by the muscular five-and-a-half-foot frame. His partners stop in unison as he screams at her, “Bitch! Yo’ ass in deep shit. No lies or I go tear up your sorry ass.”

The girl isn’t crying, but she looks horrified.

“Oscar--baby. I didn’t know Pete was there. He came up from behind me--see... see this lump--and he knocked all the stuff me down and took! I ran because - because I knew I be blamed for it.”

“Yo, Oscar,” says a larger, tighter and blacker version of Oscar. “Word on the block, Pete got some good skag.”

Oscar turns back to the girl.

“You tellin’ the truth, I ain’t gonna beat you none. We go talk to Pete. Get up.”

Mr. Tate feels sudden rage as they walk away with his chosen. No. This will not do. He stands, removes the knife from his coat and steps quickly after the strutting tuffs.

He sinks the knife deep into the kidney of the last tuff. The large black Oscar. White-silver shock traps the cry in his throat. Before he hits the ground, Mr. Tate is severing the neck of the second tuff. There is a whine-gurgle sound and blood sprays the backs of Oscar and the girl. Oscar turns, instinctively pushing the girl aside. He deflects the thrust of the knife, but it still slices into his upper chest. backhand slash catches Oscar across the cheek and upper arm just as he attempts to kick Mr. Tate. Oscar stumbles, the swinging blade making an acute eight-inch groove in his back. He rolls, stands and runs. Mr. Tate does not follow. He grabs the frightened girl and heads in the opposite direction.

Mr. Tate walks the girl into the park. They sit on a bench. She is shaking. Whenever she tries to speak, it is only a dry rasp. Her body seems too small a space to confine all her emotions. She wets herself for the third time.

Mr. Tate has the knife in his hand. He does not try to conceal it from her. He plunges it into her stomach. Hugs her, wraps his arm around her and drills the length of the blade through the flesh. A quarter inch of the blade emerges out of her back. He feels her warm blood run over his hand and onto his crotch. There is an odd ecstasy mixed with his nausea. She spits blood onto his chest-spurts and globs of it. He pulls the knife out and then quickly shoves it back in. She spits blood again and his cock grows hard. He picks her up and lays her in the grass behind the bench. He sits back down. It is twelve forty-three. She will be dead by one-thirty. Warm, but dead, anyway.

*

Her warmth bothers Mr. Tate, but he gets off. After his second release, he kisses the dead girl lovingly, impaling his tongue between purplish semi-stiff lips. It isn't as satisfying as work, but he thanks her all the same.

They call Mr. Tate early Sunday morning. Delbrook has been arrested. It seems he went out for lunch, got doped up and smashed his car into a corner bookstand on DeKalb Avenue. He has been put on indefinite suspension. They ask Mr. Tate if he wouldn't mind working seven-day weeks--starting tonight—until a replacement is found. Shouldn't take long, they promise.

Mr. Tate hopes they never find a replacement. He loves his job.

Keeps him off the streets.

END

First published 1988. New Blood #3.
Edited by Chris Lacher.
Glendora, CA.
Font: Helvetica Neue

Out of Square

Something about death. Wild. Erotic.

He stared down at his sleeping wife. A beautiful, loving woman. She's made the last twelve years of his life a heaven. Always there for him and the kids. And she still looks a firm even after their four children. His cock warmly twitched when he thought about her wanton passion-the woman fucked like a speed metal drummer.

He put the gun to his wife's head. He had to. He'd already killed the rest of the family, except Jason, the eldest of the three boys. He looked over his shoulder to check on the boy. He was still standing where he told him to.

Watching. Like he was all night. Quiet, taking in every minute detail.

He motioned at the boy with his gun hand to go stand on the other side the bed, directly facing him, looking at his mother's back. He put the gun back to her head. He pulled trigger. Jason flinched as the bullet whizzed by his ear then stumbled back when spray of blood and pink matter slapped him in the face. But he didn't cry or run. Just stood there and took it. Took it all in.

Tom Denison awoke a throbbing, rigid member and a wet sheet. Except for the receding dream, he was alone in bed. This fact deeply bothered him.

The knock at the door was sharp and persistent. After the third set of raps Tom

to answer it. Bowl in hand he walked to the door, quickly downing a mouthful of cornflakes as reached for the knob. When he pulled the door open he knew his Tuesday morning was shot.

Even though the man and woman weren't in uniform they had to be…

"You Tom Denison?"

Cops.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'm Sergeant Dennis Mallory,

This is lieutenant Jill Peterson. We're from the homicide division."

"Yeah, sure. C'mon in." Tom spoke as if his mind had just gone on hold.

Tom had a studio apartment. They were standing in the main room.

Rock posters, comic and surreal drawings and paintings littered the walls. A chaotic array so subtly disturbing that someone with money would feel possessed to put it in a gallery for all the world to see. Jill looked around the room with a smile. She noticed on the bathroom door was a life-size Marilyn Monroe and that his bed was cornered by a wallpapered rain forest scene, complete with waterfall. Dennis was caught between awe and disgust. The kitchen was no more than a two-burner gas range, a three-foot electric cooler and a toaster. The carpet was matted to nothing-but it was the thick sweet smell of pot that was really nauseating him. Tom offered them the couch as he seated himself in the chair, all beanbag

furniture and he was glad it made them uncomfortable---although he noticed that the lady cop seemed to almost enjoy it. Tom set his bowl of cereal down on the table in front of them, right next to the water pipe and the small spear of California's finest.

"So, what's up?" Tom reached over and turned the volume down on the television, just as Pebbles Flintstone was about to say her first word.

"What's homicide want with me?"

Jill adjusted her posture, pulling her notebook from her purse as she spoke,

"You're a writer, correct?"

"Yes. Fiction. Short stories mainly, still working on the great novel."

"Comic books," said Dennis abruptly. The couch was unnerving to him. He stood, glanced down with contempt at the dope, the bong, the furniture -Tom.

"Yeah, I write stories for comics." Now Tom was unnerved.

Jill sensed the bile raising in Dennis.

"You want to catch some air outside; I can handle this."

"No, I'm fine." He answered, never took his eyes off the walls.

Jill turned back to Tom, looked him gently in the eyes. He was high but Dennis was sobering him up really quick. She spoke with the calming voice of a mother.

"You're currently teamed up with artist Kevin Thomas on a N. C. Comics series called 'Chaos at Large'."

"Yeah?"

"He lives in Florida, correct?" Tom nodded yes.

She continued, "Tell me, how do a writer and artist collaborate on a project?"

Tom watched Dennis slowly pace about the room.

"Well, that depends a lot on the story. Kevin and I discuss it first over phone. Sometimes I send him the synopsis and page by page script. Or I send him the entire story in prose, and he visually interprets the story. We usually work in the latter cause there's more freedom for him.

"What style did you use on the Chaos at Large series, issues one seventy-five to one eighty-three?"

"Script."

"So, Kevin just drew what you sent him, no freedom on his part?

"As far as the stories told, that's correct. I tell him what angles to use, where to put the sound effects, what the characters are wearing. Everything.

Jill nodded slowly as she wrote. She looked over at Dennis. He was standing over Tom's bed, a single mattress, a couple of blankets and a big pillow. Then he glided away with a smile she was all too familiar with. The thoughts behind the smile angered her.

"Dennis, please go wait in the car." The please was hard for her. Dennis

looked back at her, the smile gone. He heard the tone in that please; it was Jill's way of asserting rank. He nodded, sighed quite loudly then shambled out.

"Don't mind if I leave the door open do you?"

"Yeah, go ahead and leave it open, air the place out," said Tom.

Jill nodded, Dennis nodded then floated off down the hall, only to stop about feet from the door. He leaned against the railing and looked down at the browning lawn. Saw a couple of broken sprinkler heads, heard kids playing in the background. Shook his head and slipped on his mirrored shades.

Back inside, Jill continued to question a noticeably more relaxed Tom.

"How long have you lived in the L. A. area?" she said.

"Ah...I got here in what? The summer of '85. I'm from New York. Brooklyn."

Jill nodded approvingly then said, "Are you aware of our latest mass murderer?"

"No. I haven't read a newspaper in ages and refuse to watch the news."

"He's using the same techniques of killing people as your villain does in the "Chaos at Large" series, issues 175 to 183."

'Hey, you don't think...aw c'mon---let's be serious!"

At the rise in Tom's voice, Dennis moved swiftly for the door.

"We are serious Mr. Denison---Relax Dennis!" Tom looked worriedly over his shoulder. Relaxed a bit when he didn't see a gun. "Tell us about your villain, Mr. Denison." Jill said calmly.

Tom's brow was beading with sweat due to the weight from presence of Dennis. And Dennis enjoyed being heavy, but he was sure not to let Jill see the pleasure. No smile.

*

"Mornin' Doc, got a priority case here for you."

Doctor Range looked up from his book at the stout desk sergeant his charge. A young boy, early teens. Recently bathed, dressed in faded standard-issue blues. Not just another runaway, the doctor asked himself.

"He was found wandering around the bus terminal alone, about yesterday noon," said the sergeant, "no I.D.---no nuttin' He wasn't clean, and his clothes were, well the lab boys are running a test on them, but it looks like they were covered with blood. He refuses or can't talk, not sure which but we did get one word out of him and that was Quartz. When we asked him his name that is what ran his he said, and all he has said."

The sergeant fingers through his hair. The doctor laid his book on the desk, then asked, "What's so special about him?"

"Well, Quartz is the name homicide has given to that guy who is killin' people just like a comic book baddie by the same name. Now, between you and me, this kid ain't the one, but hey?" he shrugged his shoulders as he turned for the door. "Buzz me when you need me doc."

"Thanks for making my day, Paul," said the doctor to the exiting sergeant. He turned to the young man and said, "Please sit down, Mr. Quartz."

The boy did so, but very cautiously, almost fearful of the officer.

"Are you a resident of Los Angeles or just visiting?" asked the doctor cheerfully. He received no reply. He stared deep into the boy's shallow green eyes, watched the hardness melt away as they welled up with water... then the lower lip started quivering. Doctor Range got up from his chair, out of habit he glanced down at the Garfield comic strip taped down at the upper left-hand corner: Garfield peeks cautiously down the hall from around the corner, he then quickly looks the other way. Feeling all is clear he advances into the hall, and a pie falls on his head from above---SPLUT!!

Doctor Range bent down and drew the crying young man into his arms. The boy was stiff and unresponsive, but the tears kept flowing.

*

He sat with his back against the tree, the sun filtering down through the branches and leaves, spotting his body as if he wore the garb of a jungle soldier. From his vantage point on the hill, he could see the hundreds of people bringing life to Griffith Park.

Something about death. Wild. Erotic.

He smiled wasn't familiar and turned up the volume of his headset. He with the beat but he loved it all the same. The rapid, incoherent energy soon made him oblivious to the runners and lovers around him. Down in the valley, some frisbee throwers were really whipping it around amongst a circle of six, with a dog feverishly attempting to steal it. He got lucky and snatched it in mid-air. Landing, the dog toppled into a nearby trash can.

The bomb planted within was motion sensitive, covering a range of seventy-five meters in diameter. He stood by and seemingly gawked like the rest of the living. Trying hard to conceal his excitement. Murder just keeps getting better and better. In the background he heard sirens and the sobs from the crowd. He turned up his headset until he couldn't hear them anymore and drifted through the people. He had a fleeting thought about his son, but it was just that. Fleeting. More an image than a feeling.

*

"You don't really believe I'm a suspect, do you?" asked Tom. "I mean, how can I even be held responsible for the actions of my readers?"

"You can't," said Jill, "but you could be committing the murders. Making your series a showcase, perhaps an offbeat diary, a platform from which to launch you to some form of obscure stardom."

Dennis nodded in support of her statement, staring at the walls, it sounded like a sound motive to him.

"Whoa-I mean, hey-Murder! It's just fun to write about. You don't do the shit for real." Tom ran his damp hands through thin black jonesing in front of the cops. Sad.

He reached for the bud then pulled back.

"Why is it fun to write?" asked Jill. She wondered if pot was Tom's only bad habit.

"Geez..."

Tom's underarms were slick with sweat, and his breathing was torn. "Suspense...you know, being on the edge. The reader..."

"Slow down, Mr. Denison, we haven't charged you with anything," Jill said. She looked up at Dennis, who was looking downat Tom.

Dennis looked back to Jill. Nothing said, no emotions. He sighed and walked toward the open door.

Tom sighed, wiped his forehead. Looked thankfully at Jill.

On the table was the latest issue of "Chaos at Large".

Jill picked it up and said, "This came out on Friday of last week. On the following Sunday sixteen people died from food poisoning at the King's Buffet. Matt, my son, is a comic book collector. Now the first three murders your villain, Quartz, thinks those murders weren't that I believe he's called, unusual so he didn't think much of it. Besides the fact that it takes your character eight months to do what our man has done in five days. Then when Sunday's incident at the Buffet happened, Matt showed me this issue and the previous two. You have quite a nasty imagination, Mr. Denison. Now suppose you tell us what Quartz does next issue."

Tom stood up and walked over to the desk in the corner opposite the kitchen. He picked up the notebook that was on top, turned and stumbled right into Dennis. Tom couldn't remember seeing him move. Jill was still on the couch. Written on the open page was the rough drafting of the plot. Dennis read aloud, his voice matched his demeanor; dark and rigid.

"Page one, splash. Quartz sitting on a hill with his back against a tree. It's a bright summer day, lots of happy people in the park. Page two, down in the valley some kids are playing frisbee. One of them made a diving catch for a wild throw and collide into a nearby trash can---BOOM! There was a bomb planted in the can. Quartz gets up and walks away. Cut to Chaos talking to the police chief on the scene. Page three..."

A high-pitched wail erupted in the background.

"That's the phone," said Tom. Should I answer it?"

"Sure," said Jill. Tom did, then handed the receiver to the Lieutenant.

Jill listened for a minute then impassively sat the receiver down.

"A bomb exploded in Griffith Park about forty minutes ago. We're going to do this without cuffs, O.K., Mr. Denison?" Tom absently nodded yes.

"Fine. You have the right to remain silent..."

*

The young boy gripped the cup of hot chocolate with both hands.

His lips just an inch away from the rim, the steam filtering directly into his nose.

His eyes fixed wildly on nothing.

"Are you cold?" said Dr. Range. The young boy remained silent and motionless, perking only slightly at the rise of the doctor's voice.

"Is it too hot? Maybe I can cool it off for you."

The boy slowly turned and looked at the doctor. In a whisper he said, "Quartz...all dead."

"What's that?" asked the doctor as he stretched out over the table.

Then the door opened. It was Paul.

"Got some news for you, Doc. Just came over the wire. Four people were found dead in their home in Redlands. The family name is Quartz. Report says that the father and eldest son are missing. Here are their pictures. I'd say we got a match with the boy. Oh, and by the way, that was blood on his clothes. " The sergeant left, leaving the doctor to pry the shaking cup from the boy's hands.

*

"Does the artist have his plot already?" asked Jill as they drove down Hudson Street.

"Yes. He has the complete story. Probably has most of it done by now."

"How does Quartz finally get caught -- he does get caught right?" asked Jill with a note of hope.

"Yeah but not by the law or Chaos. The mayor has issued a ten-thousand-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of Quartz. One night as Quartz is setting a trap, a gang of street toughs run into him and take him down. The mayor then refuses to give the money to a gang of degenerate drug addicts, so the gang threatened to tear up the city if he doesn't. Which bleeds into the next issue when Chaos talks the gang out of it." trailed off. Tom picked at flakes of dried ketchup on his Levis. He couldn't believe the entire situation. If only he had a joint.

Jill turned to face Tom as she spoke, "What is the trap the gang catches him setting?"

"He was loosening the wheel axle joints of a subway train. The gang saw him as they were painting a train and chased him down."

Tom stared out the window. Although he couldn't see the ocean (so many pretty buildings), he could sure smell it and almost taste it if he closed his eyes. He tried not to think about it.

Dennis looked into the rearview mirror and said, "You know, it'd save us a whole lot of time if you told us the truth."

"Eat shit and die asshole! I don't know who you're after!"

Dennis punched the accelerator as they rounded the corner, slamming Tom back into the seat.

*

He'd been at it for about ten minutes. Removed three bolts and a carter pin. Now for the other coil link. Suddenly he heard footsteps around him. Was it the cops? Soon he heard hissing---spray cans. Just some punks leaving their mark. More shit for the media to suck up. He went back to work; they'd never notice him.

He was almost done with the clip when a kid dropped his can. It rolled under the bus. Why didn't the little shit get another can? Why did the little puke have to scream when he touched him as he searched for his spray can. He was frozen with confusion, then quickly collected himself. He rolled out the other side and dashed across the smooth concrete yard. He turned to see if the gang were chasing him, and they were. He couldn't understand why, that would only draw the attention of the yard patrol and then everyone would get caught. Painting city transit buses wasn't smiled upon. He slipped on an hours old oil spill and tumbled face forward onto the concrete. Searing pain from a broke tooth, dizziness… It wasn't long before the gang overtook him.

"Stomp 'em cuz!"

He didn't know why they were doing this. He was kicked in the mouth. His broken tooth was knocked free. He coughed and spit it out.

"Blowin' shit up!"

"Messin' wit' buses now, huh, sucka!"

How'd they know? What does it matter to them? Pain brought no answers. Someone put their knee in his kidney. Then, again, a boot in the lower spine.

Suddenly the beating stopped. Numbed, yet he felt lights upon him, blurry painful shadows emitted voices that sounded like the blood and agony.

WHAP!

He was out as they slipped the cuffs on.

*

"Where does your brother live, Mr. Denison?" said Dennis coolly.

"I don't have a brother," Tom replied.

Dennis handed Tom a photograph. He walked across the room to the coffee machine, speaking as he did, "That man is suspected of killing his family in Redlands less than a week ago. He is also our prime suspect in the recent mass cities murders. They picked him up over an hour ago in the motor yard. Just like in your story. Only it was a bus and not a subway train."

Dennis poured himself a cup. Then motioned at Jill to see if she wanted some. She did. Tom studied the photo, soft green eyes, square chin, blank expression.

It was like looking into a shattered mirror before the pieces.

Tom stammered, swept away in awe. "I... you're telling me i have a brother?"

"You're adopted," said Jill, coffee now in hand. "Your parents obviously chose not to tell you about your brother. I don't know, if your minds are linked, if you will, but you're free, to go."

Tom shivered, he remembered a dream. He asked, "Did he kill his whole family?"

"No," Jill said.

"Seems he spared his son. Dragged him through the city then apparently abandoned the boy at a donut shop." Jill checked the box for donuts, she found an eclair.

"What's going to happen to the boy?" Tom asked. He glanced at Dennis, who was sitting at his desk, feet propped on the desktop, staring back Tom as he softly bounced the eraser- tipped end of a pencil off his lower lip.

Jill's voice gently regained his attention.

"As of now he's a ward of the state. I understand he will need some psychiatric care. Can I call you a cab?"

"Yes, thank you lieutenant."

As Tom walked down the stairs and into the cool L. A. dawn, he was overcome by a feeling of completeness. The sensation that comes from finding something long lost and forgotten though it is a little grim and out of square.

END

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Into the Night

Stan is running.

Days of sleeping in dark mildewy holes - nights of gliding as one with the shadows. Like firm hands tracing a lover's body.

Stan's hungry and wet. It's been raining for the better part of a week. And all he has eaten is a twinkie and half a warm Coke. He got them from the seat of a car. He's running on nerves. Crystal white shock energy. Sixty months of sweaty concrete walls, frigid steel bars, super-gloss enamel grey floors and thousands of men with attitude problems wound Stan up quite tightly. He could run forever.

His stomach did a dance turn and suddenly forever had a time limit. He had to eat.

Stan saw the house as he crossed the field. Small, conservative in appearance. Dark. He saw a larger lighted house on the hill above. As he crossed the narrow dirt service road leading to the small house, he figured it was a guest house. There was a V.W. bug parked in the driveway.

Stan walked up to the front door. It was locked. He moved over to the window adjacent to the door. The rain started coming down harder, the night became blacker. Stan coughed up some of the shit that had been sitting in his lungs for a couple of days - he was glad his nose wasn't clogged - spat out the yellow mucus with hate.

The screen was a bitch to remove, Stan bent it all to hell.

The window was open. Small miracle.

Once inside he heard a low growl, thought it was the wind and closed the window. That's when the growl bit fiercely into his calf. Stan fell back on the couch and kicked the growl with his right foot. He caught it square in the nose. It flew back taking a mouthful of Stan's flesh and pants.

"Clyde?"

The dog was making a slippery sucking noise and side stepping in circles. Clyde's nose was shattered, dark blood filled it's eyes and something was biting on his equilibrium. Clyde bumped into a wall, slid down it. Stopped breathing.

"Clyde, c'mere boy!"

Stan got up - winced and caught his breath sharply. The dog had done some damage. He limped toward the bedroom door.

"Come on boy - don't cha wanna sleep with momma?"

Stan stopped when he heard the bed squeak.

"Clyde?!"

Her feet shuffled across the carpet.

Stan couldn't see her proper when she came out of the bedroom, but he could smell every inch of her. And she smelled lean and edible. A real woman, not the sad ass of some jailhouse queen.

"Who the fuck are you! Where's Clyde?!" the woman raged.

Stan was inflamed with her. He rushed her. She ducked under his outstretched arms and stepped up into his chest with a forearm left and a rigid right fist to the gut.

Stan went down hard. She stepped away from the squirming, groaning heap of man - saw Clyde and ran to him.

The little Pekingese, whose heart was bigger than his body weight, laid still against the wall. She bent down, made a motion touch him then quickly pulled back and put that hand over her mouth, as if to hold in the horror.

She turned back to Stan crying red.

Stan rolled onto his knees; she kicked him in the side of the head with a leg of iron.

"BASTARD!" she screamed it each time she kicked him in the kidneys, face, stomach - groin...groin...groin. Each kick trained for pain. When Stan stopped moving, she stopped kicking.

She went over to the phone, picked up the receiver...and started crying.

After some time, she felt the phone in her hand and got herself together. She put the receiver to her ear and heard nothing. She pressed the bar, didn't get a dial tone then suddenly remembered that the phone would be dead until sometime tomorrow. The phone company was laying new cable damaged by the recent storms.

She couldn't go up the hill. The Fergeson's were away on their second honeymoon, plus their phone was as useless as hers. She could run down to the 7-11 which was only eight miles away and use their phone but that would mean leaving him here, and what if he recovered and split before she got back with the police. Then she thought about tying him up. She had rope in the bug and six years in the army taught her how to use it. As well as how to fight. She really didn't like the idea, but it was her only option.

As she opened the door, she was surprised to find it locked - the wonder soon ended when she saw the twisted screen laying on the lawn.

She re-entered the house with the rope in hand. (And very wet. It was raining hard outside.)

Stan laid face down on the carpet. Hands shaking, she bent down and began tying his ankles together. She turned him over onto his back and brought the two hands together...

She never saw Stan's left-hand move. It introduced the cartilage of her nose to her brain cavity.

She fell on top of Stan; he rolled her off then just laid there in pain. Every inch of him was on fire. He knew he was bleeding on the inside because his stomach felt the same way it did when he got his butt kicked by the "Hammer" when he was inside. His left leg was numb about the calf and ankle.

He knew his face was messed up and he wondered if all his teeth were loose. And between his legs - he didn't think he could live with so much pain! He couldn't believe they weren't permanently damaged

The girl feels no pain. She's brain dead. Her body doesn't know what to make of it.

Stan was awakened by an alarm. The sun was up, and he hurt bad. Fanning pain searing through his gut. He kept looking for blood - wanted to see it. It would justify the pain.

He decided to turn himself in. He would call the police, they would take him to a hospital, and they'd fix him proper.

He'd get his strength back on the inside and try to break again.

Stan pulled himself along the carpet, never looking at the girl's body. He saw the phone on the wall. Got underneath it, untied his ankles - now he looked at the girl, "Bitch", he called her harshly.

He raised himself just enough to knock the receiver off the hook. He put it to his ear. Heard nothing. He hit it against his palm, nothing. He raised himself again, fighting back the tears his stomach caused him. It kept him hunched over, he wouldn't think of straightening up. He couldn't stand on his left leg; it was hot numb from the knee down. Stan leaned heavily on the wall then began fingering the breaker bar. Nothing. He pressed it harder and many times.

Dead.

"Hello!" he said in a shock hollow voice. "Hello!?!"

Dead.

He beat the receiver against the wall. Dead. Slammed it down on the cradle.

Dead. Beat it. Hit it. Swore at it, threatened it. Dead.

He ripped it from the wall and threw it across the room.

It bounced off the still body of the girl, not disturbing it.

Stan let out a yell - then the pain made him cry and draw in short raspy breaths. He tasted blood in his mouth. Slumped to the floor. He felt a river of lava cut through his gut as he went to sleep. No more nerves to run on.

END

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MT. Prospect, IL.
Font: Times New Roman

Art is Anything You Can Get Away With

Martin Cole lit a cigarette, drew in tight and hard on the butt. He tossed the lighter back on his desk; it bounced off a couple of photos. Pictures of a fat, dead and skinned man. The corpse had a name: Eddie Jacobs. Age: 39. Residence: 385 Roseland Drive, Phoenix, Arizona. His wife had reported him missing about twenty-six weeks ago. He was found ten days ago in Elmont Park by some kids playing frisbee. Single shot to the head. (9mm. Barrel had to be kissing the temple.) His torso and back were skinned. M.E.'s report suggested that those skinned areas had recently been tattooed. And most exuberantly, as far as Dr. Thomas was concerned. Eddie's wife swears he didn't have any tattoos.

The couple had five kids; safe bet she knew her husband's flesh. Eddie used to sell cars at Peabody Dodge. He was a good salesman.

Martin hit the butt again. Let the cigarette dangle from his lips.

He studied the photos and M.E.'s report on Elyana Stevens. 27. Working mother, divorced. Blonde, athletic; played third base for the Blue Angels. A local women's softball team. She had also been French kissed by the same 9mm. A Luger. And she too had been skinned, legs, torso, back and buttocks. Strong indications that those areas had been recently tattooed. Her four-year-old son doesn't remember Mommy having tatts. Neither does anyone else.

Martin took the cigarette from his lips, set it in the ashtray. He glanced at all the photos and reports on his desk. Seven bodies in all. Kissed by the same Luger, tattooed and skinned. And that's where their connections ended. There were seven tattoo parlors in Phoenix.

He had talked to over twenty tattoo artists and scored more "canvases," that is, people who have (wear?) tattoos. Martin couldn't really get a grip on this scene. A lot of the art was indeed fascinating to behold but it was permanent. Always, you wore it everywhere, doing everything. Never fade away. Martin didn't like that. He recently learned something from an elderly canvas. In Japan, people have clauses in their wills to be skinned when they die. And their families honor the request. The tattooed skin is well cared for, and sometimes sold, if the family has come upon hard times.

Martin softly shook his head, pressed the butt out. Some cultures, strange.

But he wondered if that was what he was dealing with. Was somebody selling the skinned art? This was his project for the now, dive into the art scene.

Martin rubbed his eyes, yawned. He looked around, the office; watched his co-workers move about. Languid, quick, sleepy, determined, angry,

tired. (Why did we get into law enforcement?)

Martin stood up, pulled his coat off his chair. Started walking. He left his desk in disarray. No one would notice.

**

Phoenix wasn't that strange when it came to art. The galleries were common fare; their curators all looked down on tattoos. Fine art for the military, prison inmates and drug addicts. He got the indication that the Orient was the only region that had any respect for the art form. Well, maybe L.A.

It took Martin a few days to get on the underground track. Violent, sexual, fearless and blatant. Interesting patrons, good information but no solid leads. In fact, Martin believed that he may have given some people a new religion. One punk wondered aloud if your skin would grow back. And if not, you could always get a lot of little tatts, skin and frame them. Kinda make a collage. That'd be cool.

***

Martin was skimming through Interview, BAM, Rocket, Pump and about a dozen other L.A. and N.Y. based art and trade periodicals. Checking for new, avant-garde artists. Who's making wave or flavor of the month. He might have to do some travelling. Art shows in Cincinnati and Miami really have the locals up in arms. Something new was happening in Seattle. Nothing to do with tattoos but all kinds of people gravitate to view the controversial. Just to get a taste of it. Martin could meet someone interesting. A manila folder was slapped down hard on Martin's desk, its contents loosely spilled out. Martin looked up from the magazine and into the ice green eyes of Peter Bines. Racist. With a badge and a gun.

"Got 'nother one for ya, Super Nigger." Bines was stern and tight-lipped. "Learnin' anything from those prissy magazines. Ain't filled with nuthin' but freaks and faggots. Artist….. shit."

Martin stared into a pair of hard orbs. Thought about putting a bullet right between them.

"Ya know, we can handle a case like this. Don't need no federal help. Especially not from some affirmative action monkey."

"This whole district seems to have a problem with race. Did you know you were under investigation for racism? And I'm gonna personally behead you in court." Martin held his nerves in check. "Get the fuck outta my face," he said, low and firm.

Bines sighed, smiled. Adjusted his hat, gun belt. Posture.

"Do your job boy. Do it right -- then get the fuck outta our town. I'm tired of lookin' at you."

"Then commit suicide ... BOY!"

The looks could've melted steel. Anger so hot, it blistered the soul.

Could almost bring tears to your eyes.

Bines, still smiling softly, gently spun on his heels, slowly walked away. He didn't seem to have any outward support. he didn't get a high five from anyone. But the office was alive and aware. Martin sighed, his stomach tight and surging. He knew what he was walking into --he just couldn't believe they were so damn smug about it. How high up does this shit run? And is that why no indictments have been handed down yet?

Fuck it. Focus. Your job; your specialty. Finding murderers who get too damn happy. Martin lit a cigarette, drew in tight and hard on the butt.

He looked at the new evidence. Couldn't believe the luck. The corpse had an unfinished tattoo on his back.

Martin checked the ballistics memo: same 9mm kiss.
He was getting sloppy.

Martin studied the more detailed photos. The tattoo was outlined in dark ink. It was a jungle waterfall scene. The water appeared at the top of the right shoulder then abruptly dropped straight down the spine, exploding into the wading pool at the top of the buttocks, then streamed down the left cheek and faded off onto the left rear thigh. The tattoo was painted in spots; vivid, brilliant colors. The work looked fine to Martin but then he wasn't the artist. Obviously, he wasn't happy with it, or else he wouldn't have thrown it away.

Martin decided to drop by the morgue and get a better look at the corpse. The body was found about seven hours ago, behind Peterson High School. The body, David Meeks, was reported missing three months ago. He was 24, slight mental retardation. His mother had sent him to the store to get groceries. An easy task that David had done for years.

Martin rose up from behind his desk. He thought about David Meeks, then about Bines. Wondered why the wrong people were always being taken out.

****

Martin walked into Live Studio, a tattoo shop in South Phoenix. Seven people were waiting in the lounge, looking at the hundreds of designs on the wall and watching the three artists work with flesh and ink. Three women were amongst those waiting, two of them were alone. All three were pretty. Martin wondered why they wanted to disfigure such lovely flesh. The first pure and sweetest of arts.

The artists all made eye contact with Martin, they gave him a slight nod or wink. He had talked to all of them at one time or another. No one seemed nervous about him being there. He leaned on the hardwood railing. Watched Pat Simms put an Iron Cross on a young skinhead's beefy bicep. The boy gave Martin his hardest stare.

It was beautiful to see that shit in youth. Fucking lovely.

"How you doin' Pat?" asked Martin. He lit a cigarette, offered Pat one.

"Same-ol-same-ol." He took the offered smoke. The fingers of his rubber glove were stained black. Martin lit Pat's cigarette as James Brown pumped through the Infinities.

"All art has a style, think you can I.D. one for me?" asked Martin. He pulled a photo from his coat pocket. The pictures didn't really show the body. The lab boys had altered the photo so that the tattoo was more than ninety percent of the picture but still displayed the entire waterfall scene. He waved the photo at Pat.

Pat displayed his hands. Martin realized, ink. He showed Pat the shot. The punk also got an eyeful.

"Doesn't look familiar but it's fuckin' good work. Damn good!" Pat turned. "Yo, Eddie, check this man out!"

Martin walked over to Eddie Tuscatrado. The small, wiry Mexican stared the photo down. "Fuckin' tough. Who did it?" he asked.

Martin smiled. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"Sorry man. Maybe Shel can help you."

Pat pointed at the back wall. "We got a studio in the back. Shel is doin' a guy's back right now. Step over the chain, knock on that door over there."

Martin did as he was instructed. He heard the idle talk behind him. Apparently the word was out. Everyone knew what he was looking for: some freak with a passion for tatts. It seemed to make patrons of the scene uncomfortable; they were eager to help. For as Martin often made the point, stressed it in fact; what if the guy gets tired of doing the tatts himself. Decides to go hunting for finished art. No one wants to be skinned. Like an animal.

Martin walked into the brightly lit studio. It was small but well ventilated. All the supplies were also kept here. Shel was standing over a male body. The body laid face down on a well-padded hospital gurney. The body only had on a pair of shorts and sandals. Martin edged closer ...

"How you doin' mate?" asked Shel. He was tall, thin, shoulder-length ash-grey hair. Six earrings in total.

"How you doin'?, Shel? What are you doin'?" Shel just smiled, stepped back a pace. Martin got a full view. The tattoo covered the man's back. It was a dragon locked in mortal combat with a winged panther.

They were fighting in the sky.

"Chris, meet, ah ..." Shel paused.

"Martin Cole."

"Sorry mate, I'm not that good with names." That's alright. Nice work. How long has this taken and how long before you're finished?"

"Mr. Quiz, eh. O.K. mate. It took one four-hour session just to outline the scene. I'm doin' some detailin' now, I'll start colorin' soon. I figure, about three, maybe four three-hour sessions." Shel shrugged his shoulders.

"Chris, how do you feel? I mean, what goes on in your head?, asked Martin. He stepped around to the head of the gurney.

"Well, me and Shel do a lot of talking. I can see him work, check out the mirrors." Chris pointed to the wall.

Martin knelt down. Three mirrors twisted at the right angles gave Chris a limited but clear view of his back.

"So, you guys just bullshit as Shel gets artistic.

"Hmmm." Martin stood up. Looked Chris over. He was covered with tatts. Legs, arms...

"Is your stomach or chest printed?"

"Not yet, but I got time."

Martin just nodded. Thought about the cigarette he left out in the lounge. He wanted to light another one, then beat the urge down. He pulled the photo out of his pocket, showed it to Shel.

"Whoa! That's some work, mate. You want me to tell you who did it?…. I can't. I don't know anyone that works like this. This is the ol' style. You know, about twenty different sized needles and that thin, hard ink.

"This wasn't done with one of these guns." Shel handed a tattoo gun to Martin. The gun was small, fit comfortably in the palm. Its needles were tiny and numerous. It sounded like an electric shaver, that dull drone. He handed the gun back to Shel.

Martin sighed. "So, this style is alien to the scene?"

"Western culture, most definitely. I can't even guarantee that it's still practiced much overseas. It takes too damn long. Very tedious. You've got a serious artist on your hands. If he worked every day, ten plus hours a day, that outline had to take at least seven, eight weeks.

"I could do it in about three, four-hour sessions."

"Why do you always clock like that? Three, four-hour sessions."

"Because most people can't take much more. The process can be uncomfortable. Mind you, I didn't say painful. Although, it does have its moments, but hey…"

Shel smiled and lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah, it kinda gets tough when the coloring begins", said Chris.

Martin showed Chris the picture.

"Awesome. This is a tattoo? Incredible.' Chris studied the photo, ran his fingers over the picture. "I tell ya, this looks a lot like Peabo, he said at length, very softly.

"Who?" asked Martin and Shel, in unison.

"Peabo. He's a Haitian artist, about seventy years old. Modern impressionist. He hit the scene around forty-six, forty-seven. He's quite well known." Chris was sure of himself.

"So, you're sayin' this looks like the style of a famous artist? Actual oil and canvas kinda guy?" Martin asks.

"Yep", Chris replied. "I teach art at Saddleback Community College. Come by anytime during the week. I'll educate you on Peabo. We can also go over tattoo art. It's got a rich history, you know. Just ask for Chris Syned."

Chris handed the photo back to Martin. Martin took it, wrote Chris's name, room number, and the name of the school on the back of it. Then put it back in his coat

"Thank you, you both have been a tremendous help. Chris, I'll see you tomorrow. Gentlemen, goodnight."

"Same to you too, mate."

"I'll be waiting for you then. I should be free around one. I've only got two morning classes tomorrow."

"Count on me then," replied Martin. And he walked out the door.

"Any help?" asked Pat. The skinhead was gone.

One of the girls, a redhead, was seated before Pat. Pat was rubbing salve on her virgin, right shoulder blade.

"Yeah, I just got another education. Gotta love this job. I'm outta here. Take care."

"You too," said Pat.

Martin walked out of the shop. Hit the streets. He took his windbreaker off, draped it over his arm. The night was warm and dry. It felt good.

You can learn a lot in school. Especially when the teacher is really high on the subject and the student is more than willing to learn.

To both Chris's and Martin's amazement, the waterfall tattoo was an exact copy of a Peabo original; circa 1932.

It had been a charcoal relief.

Very immature.

Then again, Peabo was just starting out.

Martin checked into Peabo. A Haitian national who owned property in New York, Los Angeles and north of Phoenix. A lot of well-to-do people have winter retreats in Phoenix. But not many spend summers down here.

Martin drove to Peabo's house. It was in Sunnyvale. Nice arca. Clean and wealthy.

He pulled into Peabo's driveway. Parked, got out of the Ford Taurus. Checked out the neighborhood. It was quiet. One could get away with murder here. Hell, one can get away with murder anywhere, he's proven that fact many a time.

Martin spoke into a small recorder. Logged the time and scene.

He walked up to the front door. Knocked.

No answer. He didn't see a doorbell, so he knocked again.

No answer. Two-fifteen in the afternoon. Bright, warm day. Martin sighed, scratched his chest. Then he pulled out a small, hard, thin wire. Jimmied the lock.

Walked inside.

The house was cool, almost cold. It was clean, well-lit and smartly decorated. Ready for a party or a wake; depending on your mindset. Martin quietly drifted around.

He looked at the art, paintings and sculptures, tapestries and painted china.

Martin gave the stairs a quick eye, decided to give the ground floors a clean sweep. He thought about the garage.

In the kitchen, Martin heard the muffled gunshot. Just one report. (One shot to the temple. One lead kiss.) Martin pulled out his service piece. A Colt 45. A classic; strong and true. Direct and as lethal as the Lord's will. It felt good in Martin's hand. He paced slowly toward the garage door.

He pulled out his tape recorder, noted the event.

Martin wondered how a respected, seventy-four-year-old man got this twisted. And how long has it been going on? Before Phoenix, Martin had encountered only four other similar cases. All in the Utah and Colorado. Those incidents happened over four years ago. Did Peabo just go mad? Came to believe that Phoenix had the best flesh around? Flesh that would do more than just accent and compliment his work? Was this the flesh that was bringing his work to life?

Martin snapped himself out of the trance. Those moments scared the hell out of him. The mind link. Psyche mating. He wanted to spit.

Martin gripped the gun with his right hand, opened the garage door with his left.

Peabo had his back to Martin, and he was standing under a large studio light.

The garage was dark and roomy; it looked like Peabo was under a streetlamp. A body laid still on a makeshift bench/bed. The arms and legs were stiffly tied to the legs of the bench. Martin could see from his position that there was nerve-splitting stress on the victim's skin. It was so taut, you could split it with a butterknife. The gun, the 9mm, was on the worktable at Peabo's right. Peabo seemed to be just standing there.

Martin eased in. The door softly shut on its own.

Peabo reached out, his old and stiff fingers pushed aside a multitude of stainless-steel needles, dirty with paint and blood. Peabo grabbed a straight razor. Moved back toward the body.

"Put the razor down, Peabo. Put it down ole man!" Peabo turned around. His eyes were old and under a lot of strain. He couldn't see Martin.

"I said, put the razor down. Stay still and don't make me shoot you."

Peabo stood still. Razor in hand. He was squinting quite hard.

"What is this?" the old man said softly.

Martin stepped into the light. About three feet from the old man. Gun out and pointed at Peabo's small, taut chest.

"F.B.I. You're under arrest," said Martin.

Peabo saw Martin, understood. He sighed, lowered the razor. He looked at Martin, not really angry, not really guilty. But sad that he wasn't going to be able to finish the work.

"Put the razor down, please." Martin didn't ease his position. But for a second, out of the corner of his eye, he saw blood trickle from the bullet hole on the left of the victim's head. (The right side of his head was splashed on the bench and was dripping onto the concrete floor.) Then Martin smelled the blood, paints, and the tinny taste of urine. He exhaled, a long, slow breath.

Peabo just stood there. He looked at the victim's back. His art.

Peabo looked back at Martin. His eyes pleaded to be allowed to start, to finish. To remove the skin, set the art free.

"For the last time, put the blade DOWN!"

Peabo started to cry. In time, the razor slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

*****

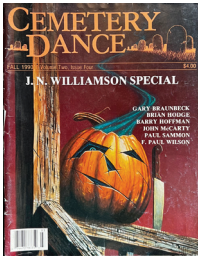
Martin had logged a few weeks of vacation time. He was punching that ticket.

Peabo had already exhibited fifteen pieces of the skinned tattoos. A gallery in New York had the work. A court order kept them from continuing to publicly display the art. The order is being fought in court. But, currently, the gallery is complying with the order. Everybody who has anything to do with art is screaming censorship. (Have they forgotten, or does it matter, how the art was produced?)

The families of the victims, once forensics had determined who the flesh (art) belonged to, wanted nothing to do with the skins. Although one family is suing the gallery for back revenue generated from the exhibit. Other families will probably follow suit.

But none of that mattered to Martin. He's on vacation. Trying to find fish in some lake in upstate New York.

END



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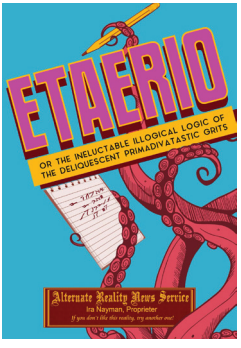
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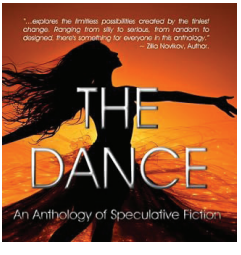
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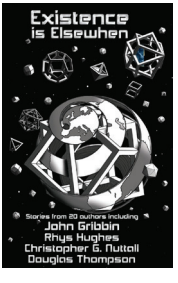

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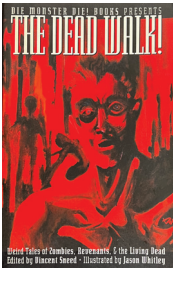

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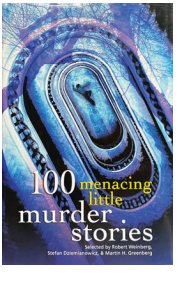

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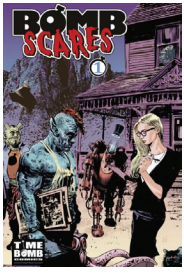

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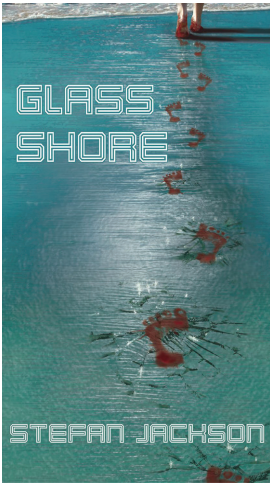

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